

REMEDIATION THROUGH A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Learners must be trained to recognize the sentences that are used to perform acts like defining, describing, classifying, hypothesizing, reporting and recommending in technical writing. As engineers they would be required to interpret and write long stretches of different types of discourse.

The traditional language teaching methodology has not trained them for discourse writing. Problems in discourse writing can be addressed only if a paradigmatic shift is made from the traditional sentence-based grammar teaching to teaching discourse grammar i.e. change from the form-focussed to the function-based communicative teaching methodology. Remediation is suggested through a discourse perspective in a series of exercises after a detailed analysis of written performance. This has pedagogical relevance for teachers to know what discourse based errors are and how they affect communication

KEYWORDS: Traditional Language, English Language, Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

A series of ten tests were conducted and the data was analyzed to find out what discourse based errors are and how they affect communication. The analysis of the written output of engineering undergraduates revealed that their language abilities range from very poor, poor to satisfactory. Many of these undergraduates come from city - based English medium schools. Others come from rural areas with Tamil or regional language as the medium of instruction. While the former group possesses language abilities that are adequate to perform a range of tasks like referencing, writing letters, comprehending discourses and writing and speaking fluently, the latter group's language abilities are a cause for concern.

The analysis of errors confirm the hypothesis that learners' written performance is affected by errors in discourse. The analysis shows that discourse errors relate mainly to two major areas: cohesion and coherence. A discourse level analysis has brought to light not only the strengths of the learners but also their weaknesses. Their weaknesses lie in inadequate vocabulary, inability to identify the use of cohesive devices that are difficult, poor grammatical competence and poor organizational skills. This has provided significant insights which may be useful for teachers and curriculum designers. Learners' strengths and weaknesses are revealed. No learner is a zero learner. They have good comprehension and do possess some linguistic ability. But it is not adequate enough to communicate effectively. Their communicative ability can be improved by helping them to eliminate their discourse errors. This is their strength.

Discourse Errors Found in Tests 1-10

Table 1

Test No.	Test Type	Errors in Cohesion	Errors in Coherence
1.	Rearranging jumbled sentences	Inability to identify lexical cohesion (vocabulary) (eg.) flux. Reference-pronominal 'then'. Demonstrative - 'this'.	Poor linguistic ability impairing comprehension of the test.
2.	Rearranging jumbled texts	Inability to identify lexical cohesives (eg.) 'smog', 'fumes'.	Logical development of ideas affected by poor discourse comprehension. Inadequate vocabulary impeding discourse processing. Discourse comprehension affected by inability to identify lexical cohesives.
3.	Cloze test	Inability to identify lexical cohesives – adjectives like 'even', 'radiates', 'release'. Noun – 'surface' Reference – quantifiers – 'some', 'a'	Local comprehension affected by inadequate vocabulary.
4.	Note-making	Wrong choice of lexical cohesion.	Illogical ideas affecting logical progression of discourse. Compression of information affecting treatment of details. Grammatical incompetence reflected in improper use of language resulting in stylistic errors.
5.	Translation	Wrong use of cohesive markers. Redundant use of cohesive markers. Omission of cohesive markers.	Poor linguistic ability like inadequate vocabulary, grammatical incompetence resulting in conceptual errors that distorts the message.
6.	Transcoding a non-verbal representation into continuous writing	Wrong use of cohesive markers. Redundant use of cohesive markers.	Rhetorical structuring affected by lengthy introduction, lack of introduction, abrupt conclusion and absence of conclusion. Logical progression of discourse affected by illogical development of details, omission of supporting details and deviation. Stylistic errors like lack of sustained focus, incorrect collocation, inadequate vocabulary.
7.	Dialogue writing	Wrong use of cohesive markers. Redundant use of cohesive markers. Omission of cohesive markers.	Grammatical incompetence resulting in stylistic errors.
8.	Paragraph writing	Wrong use of cohesive markers. Redundant use of cohesive markers. Omission of cohesive markers.	Logical progression of discourse affected by illogical presentation of details. Grammatical incompetence resulting in Stylistic errors. Sustained focus affected by disorderly details.
9.	Technical Report writing	Wrong use of cohesive markers. Redundant use of cohesive markers. Omission of cohesive markers.	Logical progression of details affected by repetition. Instances of stylistic errors such as long-winding sentences, incomplete sentences, incorrect expressions, wrong word order
10.	Essay writing	Wrong use of cohesive markers. Redundant use of cohesive markers. Omission of cohesive markers.	Rhetorical structuring affected by absence of introduction, lengthy and repetitive introduction. Logical progression of discourse affected by illogical sequencing of ideas.

As mentioned already, the learners have good comprehension ability and can communicate to a certain extent. This is their strength. They have been exposed to the English language in the previous years and have acquired some knowledge of the grammatical items which can be applied to the use of language. But it is inadequate to meet their requirements. Their communication skills need to be improved. Ramaswamy maintains that,

“Communication skills are not in-born. Whatever skills of communication a person possesses they have been learnt over the years.” (Ramaswamy, 1998).

Pedagogical Relevance of the Study

“Educational evaluation is a process of estimating and appraising the degree and dimension of students’ achievements. Further, it is also a process of estimating and appraising the proficiency level of the particular educational practice which is being conducted. It is a way of appraising the application of educational theory in practice.” (Sudha Rao, 1986).

The engineering curriculum is planned on the assumption that the college entrants are in possession of a certain amount of vocabulary (2000 words) and 200 basic sentence structures in English according to the “General Service List of English Words” prepared by Michael West (1950) cited in “English for Engineers and Technologists”, Vol. II (2002). The engineering course requires students to read and write in English extensively and to handle the advanced level subject matter of their chosen branch of engineering through the medium of English. This study reveals that there is a need to improve learners' language abilities by suitably modifying the curriculum and revising the teaching strategies. This table of errors emerging from the tests conducted in the process of this study gives a glimpse of what their abilities are. According to Hedge:

“The most effective way of helping students produce coherent and cohesive writing is to offer practice at text level that is to encourage the writing of whole texts .”(Hedge, 1988).

Remediation and Sample Exercises

Remedial teaching can be defined as a specific exercise consisting of a purposeful plan of reteaching a set of linguistic items which cause difficulty to a particular group of learners. Wilga Rivers (1983) believes that using a foreign language to communicate requires a combination of two kinds of abilities. One is the skill in using language for communication and this can be acquired by meaningful practice of sentence structures in a graded manner ranging from the simple to complex in meaningful situations. The other is an intellectual process which requires training in the correct choice of rules and modification of rules for constructing correct utterances. One ability will lead to the other. Wilga Rivers (1972) maintains,

“Automaticity in the correct use of basic language forms is a pre-requisite for learning to communicate”.

Hence, remediation in this study focusses on two aspects of language learning, comprehension of grammatical features characteristic of technical English and acquisition of communicative skills in English. For achieving these two specific purposes remedial teaching needs to be given a formal and functional orientation. In doing this, a course designer has different possibilities which have been exposed by Keith Johnson in his paper “Communicative Syllabus for Written English”. Linguistic elements used in communication must be related to the communicative functions they perform and identified through labels like definition, classification, cause and effect etc. Utterances could be categorized according to

how they correlate with each other within the framework of discourse like introduction, description, explanation, recommendation and conclusion. This would give the learners adequate practice in identifying and producing components associated with the communicative functions of technical English and also in sequencing these functions to produce coherent discourse. Knowledge of grammatical rules can be acquired through the actual use of them in communication. Verghese says:

“A knowledge of grammar is perhaps, more important to a second-language learner than it is to a native speaker.”
(Verghese, 1989).

Major grammatical errors committed by learners include prepositions and verb forms. This can be largely overcome by adopting a task-based learning. The Use of prepositions can be taught through activities like story telling or description of visuals like wall pictures. Tense and time relationship could be taught through the use of narratives. The same can be recounted as reports for teaching active- passive transformation.

Discourse comprehension and discourse composition can be practised through Information Transfer using non-verbal representations. Slow learners can be asked to transcode a visual to a verbal or vice versa. They can be asked to complete an incomplete non-verbal representation in the form of a chart or a diagram on the blackboard.

Simple diagrams of technical tools can be shown and learners can be asked to state the purpose or function of each tool. This would implicitly focus on the grammatical structure of definition. Description of simple apparatus can be attempted. This would create an interesting situation for drawing up substitution tables, for acquiring sentences which involve the use of conditional statements; Classification charts for comparing computer with human brain will give practice in the use of discourse markers like ‘whereas’, ‘while’, ‘but’, ‘on the one hand’, ‘on the other hand’ etc. Differences between a stative verb and a passive verb can be presented through pictures so that learners can distinguish between a verb describing an action and a verb describing a condition.

In the practice of discourse writing, the focus should be on both cohesion and coherence. Use of cohesion devices can be practised at the intra-sentential and inter-sentential level. Since the errors are related to the omission, wrong choice and redundant use of cohesive devices, exercises can be designed on the following pattern to remove them.

Level-A: Use of Cohesives at the Intra-Sentential and Inter-Sentential Level

The following exercises with single or pairs of sentences can serve as samples. Such exercises can be used for teaching the use of cohesion at the intra-sentential and inter-sentential level.

Exercise I: Join the Following Pairs of Statements with a Suitable Link Word and Rewrite them as One Statement

- This is one of the best designs. The design has been presented to the committee.
- A lathe is basically a machine for turning between centres. A lathe can also be used for other jobs.
- The machines can easily be dismantled. They can be put together again after they have been looked at.
- Breeder reactor is a type of reactor. It produces more fissile material than they consume.
- An explosion liberates energy in large quantities. The energy is used in the internal combustion engines.

Exercise II: Correct the Wrong Cohesive Devices found in the Following Sentences

- An autorickshaw like a taxi is a form of transport used on roads. But an autorickshaw does not involve the use of human muscles.
- The pulverisers rotate and they repeatedly strike the coal.
- The first stage of the rocket burns out. It is ejected immediately.
- John finished his work and went home.
- Prem was doing maths homework when all the rest were listening to the lecture.

Exercise III: Remove the Redundant Cohesive Devices Present in the Following Sentences

- The staff showed pictures of batteries and he explained where to put them.
- The function of a summary is similar to that of a schematic diagram, which contains only the key facts, ideas and conclusions.
- There are two types of summaries. They are executive summary and abstract summary. These have different uses.
- The factory experienced a power loss at 10 a.m. The maintenance staff loosened all the power outlets and this resulted in even more loss of time.
- I tried not to lose the phone number but I lost it anyway. It was a valuable phone number.

Exercise IV: Join the Following Pairs of Statements by Using a Suitable Cohesive Device and Rewrite them as One Sentence

- Computers can solve problems at the rate of 100,000,000 steps per second. One among the many reasons why they have become popular.
- I was assigned the evaluation of the proposed analyses technique. I was to compare the proposed analysis technique to other potential techniques.
- The largest selling car in Japan is a Suzuki product. General Motors, the largest automaker in the world has selected Suzuki for collaboration.
- One of the effect of stress is irritability. Stress can have many physical side effects.
- We checked the data thoroughly. We were convinced of the inferences drawn.

Exercise V: Identify the Wrong Cohesive Word in the Following Sentences and Supply the Correct Link Word

- If a boy does not like getting his hands dirty or cannot put up with a lot of noise you will find a mechanic's career an unsuitable one.
- The casting was defective but he was not a good moulder.
- The foreman was doubtful about him being able to operate the machine properly.

Exercise VI: Remove the Redundant Cohesive Word Present in the Following Sentences

- It was the foreman to whom he gave the work to do.
- The tools, which included a chisel, mallet, marketing gauge and scriber were placed in the tool chest.
- The two meter readings conflicted, but he used the one which he considered the most accurate.

Level-B: Exercise in Coherence

Errors in coherence may relate to any of its features like rhetorical structure or overall organisation, logical progression of ideas relating to theme, treatment of details and stylistic features. The following exercises designed in the use of coherence features, will help learners to write coherently.

Exercise VII: The Learners can be Asked to Write an Introduction and Conclusion to the Following Text

Asthma is a illness related to the respiratory organs. Allergy is the factor that causes it. People may be allergic to different things. The treatment of asthma lies in first identifying what causes allergy. It could be through a food item, change in climate, or even tension. Contact with the allergen causes an attack of asthma and the best medical advice is to avoid the allergen.

Exercise VIII: Learners can be Asked to Edit Lengthy Introduction Like the Following One**My First Day in College**

The thought of my going to college aroused a whole lot of mixed feelings in me. I woke up on that day feeling excited that I am going to be in a new environment, meet new friends girls and boys and I wondered what ragging would be like. I got-ready and reached college a little early as I needed to find the place where I had to report.

I soon made friends with students from my own branch namely Electrical & Electronics Engineering. We were briefed about the rules and regulations of the college, the dress code and the academic programme by the principal and HOD. Then we were taken to the various places like library laboratories, prayer hall, hostel and lecture halls. I returned home feeling happy and waiting for classes to begin.

Exercise IX: Rearrange the Following Jumbled Ideas in a Logical Sequence

Some heavy internal combustion engines use a gas fuel or else diesel oil and the fuel/air mixture may be ignited either by a spark or by compression of the cylinder. In internal combustion engine, heat is generated by the combustion of an inflammable charge into a cylinder. However for small i.e., engines such as those which are used in motor cars, the charge is a mixture of petrol and air and is ignited by a spark from the distributor. The heat energy is immediately converted into mechanical energy.

From “The Structure of Technical English”. (Herbert, 1965).

CONCLUSIONS

It was observed that by practicing remedial exercises suggested above, learners’ written performance improved. This has validated the hypothesis that a paradigm shift from the traditional sentence- based grammar to teaching discourse grammar through a cohesive and coherence perspective would help in substantially reducing the errors committed by engineering learners.

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